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Seeing  
and  
Imagining

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## Foreword

Like many other artists I struggle with what, why and how to make something. In this essay, I tried to think about that through works that I'm drawn to right now, although I couldn't reach any conclusion.

I start this essay with a letter to another painter about knowing what you are painting when you are painting. The second chapter is about the viewer's experience, and how one interacts with a painting by trying to read something from something that's given to you all at once, a pile of information.

And then I wrote about Mark Manders' sculpture work and the interaction that I had with it through imagination prompted by the (perceived) material condition of the sculpture. The essay ends with a chapter where I think about the painting's plausibility.

## 1. Overview when making: Letter to Cecily Brown



Cecily Brown, *Be Nice to the Big Blue Sea*, 2013, oil on linen, 109 x 171 inches (276.9 x 434.3 cm) <sup>1</sup>

Cecily, your paintings almost always depict some scenes with figures in them. I saw one of your big paintings in the flesh once. Up close, its surface was busy with marks, strokes, textures, and lines, and I lost the whole image and forgot what I approached it for. As I backed away from the painting, the figures revealed themselves as a whole image again.

I wondered if you experienced this loss of overview when you paint your big paintings, uncertain about how the part you were working on looks like in the entire painting. With our arms being only so long, I doubt that you were able to see what you were painting the whole time. Did you have lots of moments where you were stepping back and forth, forgetting how the whole painting looked, and having the painting show itself to you as you distance yourself from it?

Using some Rebecca horn type of arm elongation equipment wouldn't provide you with a proper stable grip and control of the brush. The longer the stick gets, the heavier it will be, limiting your wielding of the brush. Did you get lost many times when you were painting this big leg? Do you dream of being a giantess with long, strong arms so you don't have to have moments of losing the full sight, the overview of what you are making? Or do you find that knowing exactly what you are doing makes it scarier to proceed?

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<sup>1</sup> Photograph by Robert McKeever, "Cecily Brown, *Be Nice to the Big Blue Sea*" 2013, <https://gagosian.com/exhibitions/2013/cecily-brown-beverly-hills/>



Walter Swennen, *Tattoo*, 2014,  
acrylic on canvas, 119.8 x 100.0 x 2.7 cm,  
Courtesy the Artist and Xavier Hufkens.

Walter Swennen said in an interview that a painting becomes a *coloriage* when you know what you are painting.

**“If you know exactly what you want to paint, you have a project and you have to only execute it** – it’s boring, but you are occupied all day. I think that became important for René Magritte later in his life. He made extraordinary and bizarre, partly abstract, paintings until around 1928 or ’29 – and he painted them in a rather quick way. But then he came under the influence of bad friends, poets [laughs]. He essentially began to make **images**, not paintings. **What I mean by that is it turned into an exercise of *coloriage*– colouring a preconceived design.** The title became so important, and you have the feeling that it’s a joke in two parts: one part is written; the other is an image.”<sup>2</sup> (my emphasis in bold)

But I think painting can’t ever be a pure execution. Because a painter makes painterly choices in getting close to the image they have in mind. This is also the case for your paintings in which you are re-interpreting old master’s paintings. It’s like how musician performs their same music live and you still go to see them because it’s different every time. But maybe this analogy doesn’t quite work. because singers sometimes get booed when they only do their new songs on stage that no one has heard of yet. People love songs they know and can sing along to. And you have to know the song well to be thrilled about how they’ve interpreted it differently this time.

Speaking of knowing, Charline says her ambition is ‘to create an image that has the iconic value of a sign but remains ambiguous in its meaning.’<sup>3</sup> And that she wants to ‘get abstraction to a point where it screams that it is something: a representation and a thing.’

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<sup>2</sup> Peter Wächtler, “Against Taste: Peter Wächtler and Walter Swennen in Interviews” (Frieze, 2016) <https://www.frieze.com/article/against-taste>.

<sup>3</sup> Mark Godfrey, “Statements of Intent: The Art of Jacqueline Humphries, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, and Charline Von Heyl,” (The online edition of Artforum International Magazine, May 1, 2014). <https://www.artforum.com/print/201405/statements-of-intent-the-art-of-jacqueline-humphries-laura-owens-amy-sillman-and-charline-von-hey-46327>.

To do this, the painting has to go beyond what she calls “design,” a term that for her refers to the visually known world—not only designed objects but also products, websites, ads, etc. Design gives things recognizability, and the meaning of designed things relies on this recognition. It is what a painter will fall into when she knows what she is doing—so von Heyl says she inevitably finds herself designing, but that she strives to go beyond this. For her, abstraction, when successful, has the same reality and visual power as design, but will be more difficult than design and will not convey a meaning.’<sup>4</sup> (my emphasis in bold)

Do you think cool painters like Amy Silman and Charline von Heyl want their painting to have unknowability<sup>5</sup> not just to make it interesting for themselves, but also because they think a painting sort of dies when it’s too clear? Because with being too clear and too easy to grasp, a painting risks becoming an illustration?

Unlike Walter, I’m fine with image paintings. Image paintings that involves the painter having an image in their mind when they start to paint, and also having something recognizable for the viewer. I’m fine with it as long as it’s an image that doesn’t already exist in the world, something new. This might be because I see paintings and drawings as the closest medium one can use to communicate their mental image. And I LOVE seeing other people’s mental images. It’s sort of like seeing someone’s diary. When I was in that boarding school in South Korea I succeeded to sneak some peeks at diaries of about five other students, and it was really gripping read, every time. You should try it if you get a chance.

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<sup>4</sup> Godfrey, Mark. “Statements of Intent: The Art of Jacqueline Humphries, Laura Owens, Amy Sillman, and Charline Von Heyl.” The online edition of Artforum International Magazine, May 1, 2014. <https://www.artforum.com/print/201405/statements-of-intent-the-art-of-jacqueline-humphries-laura-owens-amy-sillman-and-charline-von-hey-46327>.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*

## 2. Trying to See When a Painting Reveals Itself All At Once

Music, poetry, and video are revealed/unfolded to the viewer in a sequence that has been planned by the artist. With paintings and photographs, an artist can't control that. Being a fixed image and having no set duration, a painting reveals its entire appearance at once. Joselit points to this as one of the reasons visitors at MoMA 'move from painting to painting taking pictures with their cell phones.<sup>6</sup>

Every painting STORES an exorbitant stockpile of affect. How, for instance, could each individual signifying mark be accounted for optically, emotionally, and psychologically? No wonder MoMA's viewers resort to recording this potential energy rather than attempting the impossible task of consuming it all at once. One of the marvels of modern painting is that this **tension between marking and storing time remains present on its surfaces**, since its constituent marks, which are laid down over time, are **always simultaneously available to vision**. Painting has been, and remains to be, the privileged **format for negotiating attention**, for exploring the regulation and deregulation of affective time in an era of massive image production and circulation.<sup>7</sup> (my emphasis in bold)

Even if it reveals itself at once, it's difficult to really see an entire painting at once. Your eyes dot around, focus and zoom in on different spots and you have moments of discovering and examining different areas or things in the painting.

If a painter is really concerned with the order of unfolding or the viewer's flow of reading of a painting, they might try to nudge the viewer i.e. using a color that pops out from the rest of the painting, to draw the viewer's eyes to it first. Or put something face-like somewhere, as we are drawn to faces. And maybe that's because looking into a window of painting is a slightly disorienting experience, and the faces are something familiar, something you know. Or maybe it's the opposite, your brain is looking out for potential threats. I stopped with this after I realised that it can only kind of manage to nudge where the viewer's eye would go in the very beginning of seeing a work.

Right now I am drawn to this painting of Lee Lozano that she made circa 1963. Like many of her paintings, this painting is untitled. This is a vague, curious, ambivalent image. I think I like images that make me think I recognize something but not so clearly.

I read the forms in this Lozano painting in many different ways. The blue arch that stems from the lower right corner of the painting looks like an eel-like tail that the sky has grown or moon shaped thing that the sky was missing and quickly conjured up to trick you. The same blue arch also seems to give the figure a grin with the way it's covering the figure's mouth, or cutting through the figure. It's unclear. Because you can't nail it down as one thing, they keep on changing when you try to read it.

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<sup>6</sup> David Joselit, "Marking, Scoring, Storing, and Speculating (On Time)," in *Painting beyond Itself: The Medium in the Post-Medium Condition*. (Berlin: Sternberg press, 2016), p. 12

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p. 14



Untitled, Lee Lozano, Circa 1962, Oil on canvas  
106.6 x 116.7 x 1.8 cm / 42 x 46 x 3/4 in<sup>8</sup>

I came across the term ‘convertible signs’ in David Joselit’s text where he discusses elements in abstraction that I think can be applied to this Lozano painting.

“The convertibility of the sign creates a kind of lenticular effect, as various registers come forward or recede in the viewer's attention. The breakthrough here lies not in envisioning the coexistence of several semiotic levels/but in bringing together this multiplicity within a singular, even simplistic painterly procedure. /each line in One, for instance, is always rising and falling through distinct semiotic states that exist simultaneously **even if they cannot be perceived all at once**. This is what defines a convertible sign./**convertible signs are what make Abstract Expressionist painting dynamic, open-ended, always in a process of becoming**. It is an art of polymorphous semiosis unfolding in real time, in which different orders of sign emerge and subside.”<sup>9</sup> (my breaks)

Here Joselit is talking about Pollock’s jizzy drip painting from 1950 titled One: Number 31. Joselit seems to describe the conversion of signs that are happening at a much faster pace than in this painting of Lozano. These Lozano paintings don’t have this throbbing, pulsating effect of Pollocks that confuses your eyes with its moire-like effect, making it even harder to focus on an image or a sign that you think can almost see. This Lozano painting has a less chaotic configuration, and this conversion or becoming when you try to see it happen much slower. You control the speed. It changes when you try to see it as another thing.

Looking at this painting I feel like I almost understand what it’s showing, but not quite. When you are presented with something not recognizable in painting, you project. You project the most when it's vague like this. Like in her tool paintings made around year 1962-1964 where the tools are warped and filling the entire frame, this painting frames the figure tightly, and there’s almost no space given to the background. Lozano has already zoomed in this much for you. And now you want to get closer and you get into these figures as if you were to possess it and see outwards. You try to fit yourself into the painting’s shoes to see if that gives you anything. I do this with this Lozano painting. It’s easy when what you think you see in the painting resembles a person (it has a nose).

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8© The Estate of Lee Lozano Photo: Stefan Altenburger Photography Zürich, 2022, <https://www.hauserwirth.com/hauser-wirth-exhibitions/29131-lee-lozano-in-somerset/#images>

<sup>9</sup> David Joselit, "Signal Processing." (*Artforum International* 49, no. 10. 2011) p 356-362.



### 3. Room to interact



Mark Manders Fox/Mouse/Belt 1992(cast 2007), Painted bronze and belt, 6 x 15 x 44" (15.2 x 38.1 x 111.8 cm)<sup>10</sup>

I wanted the spectator to stand before a work that looked like it had just been made, the exterior of which was of wet clay. **It's of no importance whatsoever that I first had to fire the sculpture in a kiln, then cast it in bronze, and finally paint it to look like wet clay.** I don't want to use my material symbolically but in a more actual and direct way. I don't want to say: 'This material stands for this or that meaning or for this or that personal interpretation of the meaning of the material' because that creates an annoying and evasive illustrative rebus that requires too big a detour around language. **I prefer to use reality and its rich infinite vocabulary.**<sup>11</sup>(my emphasis in bold)

I ended up painting the sculpture to look like it was made of wet clay. For this reason, it exhibits an extreme, vulnerable nakedness, and it seems as if you could just press your fingers into it at any time. This is the only future moment that the sculpture seems to capture.<sup>12</sup>

What looks like a wet clay sculpture is actually made of painted bronze. But Manders doesn't appear to be keen on destabilizing the viewer's assumptions. Painted bronze is just a practical choice because unfired clay is too fragile as a material. Manders seems to want you to take it at face value, to see these sculptures as if it's freshly made out of clay. Some of his sculptures even have a sheet of plastic laid on top, like is done in ceramic workshops to keep the clay wet and workable.

These wet clay works look very **vulnerable, fragile, and changeable; it doesn't really matter if they are made in bronze.**<sup>13</sup>(my emphasis in bold)

When you go with just your eyes and believe these sculptures are made of material that's porous, malleable, and unfixed, it starts to give you ideas about how the work can change. The perceived (albeit wrong) materiality of the sculpture gives the viewer room to interact with it by running simulations of its different futures in their head.

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<sup>10</sup> MoMA, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/142587>

<sup>11</sup> Marije Langelaar, "Room, Constructed to Provide Persistent Absence", in Mark Manders/Singing Sailors." (Toronto and Amsterdam: Art Gallery of York University and Roma Publications, 2002) p.35.

<sup>12</sup> ibid

<sup>13</sup> Audrey Chan, "Artists at Work: Mark Manders." (Afterall online, December 7, 2010.) <https://www.afterall.org/article/artists-at-work-mark-manders>.

When I first saw this work in his exhibition somewhere in the Netherlands circa 2014, I didn't know it was made of painted bronze. I walked in and encountered what I thought was a not-yet-cracking dry clay sculpture. I imagined affecting the alternative and immediate future of this work. Like pressing into a peach to see if it's ripe, I wanted to squeeze it. I wanted to pat the little clay mouse into the clay fox's stomach and smooth it over.

And then I thought of how this work will change without any human force, but just with time. Clay will shrink as it dries and the belt will become loose. The clay will crack. Someday it will all become dust. If someone else took this work at face value like me, they might be cleaning the bottom of my rain boots a few months after their encounter, wondering about how that permeable sculpture is doing. I pictured it slightly swollen from the atmospheric humidity.



Felix Gonzalez-Torres "Untitled" (Perfect Lovers) 1991<sup>14</sup>

These two clocks are displayed right next to each other, touching. It made me melancholy when I speculated about their future faith. They will eventually go out of sync more and more with each other and eventually run out of battery. You don't know which one will run out of battery first. It's only when the batteries of both clocks die that the two clocks will stay in perfect sync together, forever.

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<sup>14</sup> © 2022 The Felix Gonzalez-Torres Foundation, Courtesy Andrea Rosen Gallery, New York, 2022, *MoMA*, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81074>.

## 4. Because the Painting Logic - A Cat Clock

For my graduation project I'm making a show based on my heartbreak over a foster cat that had a perfect body. One of the sculptures in the show will be a working clock covered in black and white fur. Someone asked why it can't be a painting and I immediately had the answers to it.

It's because of the logic of painting and how much room it gives. If I would turn this idea into a painting, there suddenly is a room to believe that the cat clock might be alive. That it's a cat turned into a clock with magic, still breathing and purring in the world of that painting.

Looking at a painting is like looking into a portal in the animation Rick and Morty, you assume and accept that this painting is a small window into a different world that might have different logic and laws of physics. The portal is unknown, so there's infinite room to 'yes-and' everything. You assume the painter has taken a most effective snapshot of that world, with the composition also in mind. And since it's a snapshot, you assume things continue to live on. Taking a snapshot doesn't kill the subject. But freezing it into a sculpture kind of kills it. Sculpture stops time. Maybe it has something to do with seeing the backside or the underside of the sculpture.

Anyways, I want to nail that wrong door shut by making a sculpture of this idea, not a painting. It's not alive, the cat is not with me anymore. Even if he was I wouldn't have foolishly turned him into a clock. And most importantly the concept of time wouldn't remind me of his absence. The real thing has left, and the show would be made with the memory that's left. A homunculus. By tending to and feeding the deteriorating memory it has made something strange grow and ferment. It's a conjuring of grief object.



Screenshot image from Rick and Morty Season 6, ep 6,<sup>15</sup> (Image cropped by me)

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<sup>15</sup> Image from Rick and Morty Season 6, ep 6, from <https://static1.moviewebimages.com/wordpress/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Rick-and-Morty-Season-6-Episode-6.jpg?q=50&fit=contain&w=1140&h=&dpr=1.5>

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